

Many The Miles by **L. Borealis**

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Summary: While Mike Wheeler's and El Hopper's trips to Europe could not be any more different, they both found themselves on their final day at the very same space: lonely, dejected, and just ready to go home. Yet by a few absolutely ridiculous twists of fate... all of those feelings are about to change. A Mileven Meetcute.

1. Chapter 1

It had been a perfect trip.

Or, at least... it *should* have felt that way.

Backpacking through Europe had always been one of El's major life goals, and it had finally happened. With a fresh Bachelor's degree in her pocket and a summer of waitressing tips stuffed into her savings account, she had finally done it. Over the course of the last two months, tick by tick, she had crossed off endless experiences on her bucket list. She'd let herself get lost in the London Tube for days, jumping off whenever the mood struck her, doing nothing more than wandering the back alley streets with wide eyes and adventure in her heart. She'd stood as close as she could to Stonehenge, gaping at the intensity of its mysterious history. She'd stumbled upon street buskers in Brussels, their music filling the air with sounds so sweet that they made her feet stop still and her eyes brim with tears. She'd stared out over countless miles of rural rolling hills from the windows of trains, pastoral fields in The Netherlands and sharp mountains in Switzerland, all filling with snow as the final weeks of her trip passed.

Yet, through all of this El had also found something else on her trip. Something that she hadn't been expecting or been prepared for...

Loneliness.

Absolute crippling loneliness.

It wasn't like she wasn't *aware* of the challenges that she faced in this area. She knew who she was. El was the girl who *always* chose the self checkout lane at the grocery store simply because the idle chit chat with the attendant sometimes felt like just too much. She was the person who refused to answer her phone if she didn't recognize the number. Her only friends were people who her *other* friends had introduced her to; a slowly growing web of connections here and there that had never fully materialized into an actual friend group.

It's not that she disliked people, not at all. She just didn't know how

to approach them, or how to keep the conversation going alone from there. And it wasn't an issue that she'd dwelled on much before, for she actually really liked spending time with herself. She was good at being her own friend, laughing at her own jokes or writing them in her journal as she whiled away her hours. She liked to lose herself in easy music in her headphones as she wandered the streets, each song serving as a soundtrack to heighten what she saw. She liked to wrap herself in a good book at the end of the day, the fictional characters that she met feeling more like potential friends than anyone who passed her on the street.

Yet, those kinds of friendships had their limits, and this trip had laid those limits bare.

It seemed so silly now, but somehow she'd thought that she would just magically become a different person when she landed in Europe. She'd envisioned herself making fast friends with the girl in the bunk above her in whatever hostel she floated through. She fantasized about meeting locals on the trains who pointed her in the direction of hidden gems off the beaten path. She'd pictured chit chats with the cafe waitresses and new friends made easily at bar tops after long days of travel.

And in her deepest wishes, she'd pictured more. Much more. A handsome stranger, maybe traveling on the same path as her. Nights hand in hand walking the canals. Uncontrollable laughter as they ran through the streets. Heads on each other's shoulders as they rode the trains together through the countryside, their legs propped up on their oversized backpacks and their feet intertwined. Holding each other's gazes over candlelight and wine, her skin prickling with sensation and connection and the thrill of it all... Long languid kisses in the park that didn't need to be interrupted for anything in the world...

This was, however, *not* how her trip had ended up. Not. At. All.

Instead of making friends with the girl in the bunk above her, she'd watched week after week as *other* girls met each other in the hostel dorms. She marveled at the ease these girls had at becoming fast friends. She averted her eyes sadly as they casually began to plan their days together within a half hour of learning each other's names.

She tried to speak up but couldn't find a way as groups of strangers began to chat in the common rooms, and before she knew it they had run along to pubs or dinner in a mass of jovial laughs and handshakes, leaving her behind as though she hadn't been there at all. In every city, every time.

And handsome strangers? They'd been elusive, or she had been invisible.

After a few weeks El realized that if she was going to have any chance of making any connections at all, she was going to have to change. And she tried. She really did. Unfortunately though, it just became a nerve wracking exercise in making a fool of herself. Anytime she tried to strike up a conversation it fizzled, or worse, it would never take off at all.

As the weeks passed she found herself policing every word that she said, worrying that her thoughts weren't good enough and her stories weren't funny enough. Time and time again she tried and failed to connect with new people. Almost always they zipped off in their own direction and she was left with only herself and a growing sense of anxiety.

How was this *easy* for some people?

After a few more weeks, the seething loneliness had finally crept under her skin in a way that stuck. It was that issue that had finally made her call her Dad about a week back. Sure, her eyes had just bulged at the shockingly empty bank account staring back at her from the tablet screen, but she could have asked him for cash and he would have begrudgingly helped. Instead, she found herself asking for something different: a new ticket home. Two weeks early.

It was a humbling request that had left her terribly sad. The truth was, though, that she desperately wanted to see her Dad. She ached for her friends at home, too, the few that she had. She wanted to hug every single one of the people that she loved with an intensity that she had never felt before.

And now here, today, finally, she was only minutes away from beginning that final journey home.

Or... maybe not.

People were moving around her in every which way at the airline gate. Hurried feet were dashing to the attendant's desk with a sense that almost felt like a mob, yet El had no idea why. The screen had just shifted and, with an indecipherable speech through the PA speakers, her stomach dropped.

Something was happening. Something significant. Yet, El had no way of knowing what it was.

English had been a predominant language throughout most of her trip, but here in Italy it was a different story. And El, she was lost? Completely unclear as to what was happening.

She stared at the open jet bridge door and moaned. She was so close, but so far away.

Of course this was how it would turn out. Dead broke in a country where she didn't speak the language, completely out of food and money, and in desperate need to just get on the plane. Just one cramped red-eye economy flight with a middle seat in the very back row stood between her and Chicago, where a bit of time freeloading off her step-brother was in order for just a couple of days until her dad had the day off to come and pick her up.

Though Chicago itself was likely to be weird...

"Why Chicago? Can't I just fly back to Indianapolis?"

"Kid, if we fly you into Chicago and I come get you Sunday it'll be \$600 cheaper. Just stay with Will for two days."

Who was she to argue with the man who was willing to shell out the money for her to get home? Yet the truth was she hardly knew her step-brother. She'd only met Will twice. Once at Christmas for three hours the year before and once at her their parent's wedding just before she'd left for her trip in Mid-October. He was nice enough. At least she could have a conversation with him... maybe... unlike anyone on *this* continent.

Until then, though, all she had left to eat were two measly granola

bars in her backpack and nothing more.

Oh, and *the chocolates*.

She was NOT about to break into those. They were a treat for home. Scooped up in Paris on a very decadent day one week before, right before she realized that she'd spent almost every dime that she had. They were something special to savor. A memento to help her remember her favorite parts of the trip. She refused to eat them like an ravenous animal on the scratchy carpet of a foreign airport while trying to discern if she was ever going to be able to leave at all.

Yet, she feared that being trapped in the Rome airport might be her destiny, for if she could decipher the body language from the people around her, something was most definitely wrong.

El cringed and drew breath, her voice shaking nervously as it uttered the only Italian that she knew to the person closest to her.

"M- mi scusi? Parli Ingles?"

A middle aged woman looked up from her seat, but her foul expression seemed to scream a silent 'no', her nose upturned as though El was butchering the beauty of the Italian language with her horrendous accent.

Which honestly? She was.

Wincing, El hiked her backpack higher up onto her back and moved closer to the long line that had formed at the gate desk. She paced the edge, her voice at the tip of her tongue, but over and over she stopped herself from asking anyone for help, too nervous and sensing a lack of welcome from each of the frustrated faces that made up the line.

All the while, the line seemed to grow shockingly longer as a voice spoke in quick Italian over a crackly intercom. She bit back a nervous growl as she continued to walk toward the back, her eyes searching each face for a sense of *something* that could make her feel comfortable enough to try her horrible Italian again.

That's when she heard it.

"Do you need help?"

El looked up in surprise as an American accent fell upon her ear from just close enough that she thought maybe it was addressing her. Sure enough, two people back in line stood a tall guy about her age, imploring her curiously.

Black hair, rakishly swept. Pale skin, brushed with freckles. Dark eyes, kind...

"Yes!" she sighed, the word coming from her lips with an odd sense of relief. She trotted down the line about just a bit, looking up to him as she reached him. "Do you um... Do you speak Italian?"

"Um, yeah?" The young man scratched his neck, his eyes darting from the front of the line to her and back again, "I mean, enough to figure out what's going on, I guess."

"Oh! Oh, that's great," El breathed a sigh of relief, "Could you tell me what's going on? I um... I have no idea."

The attendant's voice came over the PA once again and the man looked up to listen. Her words were just as undecipherable to El as they had been the last three times.

Mike grimaced as he looked back down at El, "Well, she's definitely saying that our flight is cancelled,"

"Really?" El cringed.

"Yeah, she's telling everyone to get in this line for rebooking," his hand fumbled on his luggage handle, "Yeah, I'm sorry."

El cursed under her breath. Her stomach growled in anger and her heart dropped nervously. "Okay, well, thank you," she looked at her feet as she hiked her backpack higher up onto her shoulders, "I'll just uh... go to the back of the line, then. Thanks."

"Oh," A sense of surprise laced his voice in a way that made El look back up. He looked toward the end of the long line and then back to her. He was hesitant for a moment before he smiled in an unexpected way. Sheepish. Almost shy..."Do you uh... want to cut here?"

El let out a quiet gasp, "You'll let me cut the line?"

"Yeah! I mean uh, sure!"

El's face lit up brighter than it had in days.

The man wrenched his duffle bag from the ground and stacked it on his roller bag in a hasty fashion to make space for her to stand. El caught a gloriously dirty look from the woman standing behind her new savior, but she tried not to pay attention.

"Thank you *so* much," she said intently as she stepped into place beside him in the line, "I *really* appreciate it."

"Oh, yeah. I mean um... no problem. Sure," he stuttered. He gave her a nervous smile once again.

And she returned one, just as nervous. Just as hesitant.

And then... things fell silent.

It was almost instant, the all too familiar creeping insecurity that crawled up her spine. It had become her constant companion over the past couple of months, popping into her mind any time that she found herself in a situation such as this. El chewed on her lip as her fingers shuffled her backpack strap. She watched the man's fingers fumble again against the handle of his silver roller bag.

Her mind replayed all of the ways in which this conversation could die an awkwardly agonizing death.

...But something in her didn't want that, not at all...

"I'm um... I'm El, by the way!" Her voice jumped in pitch as she held out her hand to him with an intense jut.

The young man looked back down to her, blinking fast. "I'm uh... I'm Mike," he took her hand. His grip felt warm, firm, safe. "Nice to meet you."

"You too," she said gratefully.

Mike smiled softly, looking her up and down before he dropped her hand, "So you uh... how did you like Italy? Unless I mean, you caught a connection here? Maybe you didn't travel through Italy at all. That was presumptuous. Sorry, I didn't mean to assume. I just, you know, you're here and you - you have this backpack and — "

It was curious, the way that Mike began to ramble. His words seemed to come faster than his thoughts, each phrase seeming to require his constant revision.

He seemed... nervous.

Just like her...

The similarity served to put El just a bit at ease, and she was surprised to hear an easy laugh come from her mouth. "No, I was here in Italy, you were right," she reassured him, "I've been traveling through Europe for the last couple of months. Just got to Rome a couple of days ago."

"Oh, cool! Right, that's cool." He ran his fingers through his hair and looked away for a split second before he looked back, "Have you uh - been traveling alone this whole time?"

"Yeah."

"Wow. That's... that's really cool."

"Thanks," El felt a soft blush rise in her cheeks. She swallowed it down. "What were you here for? In Rome?"

Mike seemed to avert his eyes at the question, "Oh, I uh, I was here for, well, I guess you could say I was here for school."

"Oh, that's cool! What do you study?"

Look at her! She was doing it! She was making small talk! And weirdly, this time, it didn't feel that hard!

"Well," Mike replied, pausing for a moment before this worse spun back up, "It's a long story. I was here for this program that was a semester long, but I could apply it to an Applied Sciences Master's

degree if, you know, if I wanted to?" he shrugged, "I got my bachelor's in English but I can't do much with that, obviously, so I thought I'd try to go after the other thing I'm good at."

"How did you like the school?"

"It was... I don't know," he said, scratching the back of his neck again, "Big decision, I guess? You know, relocating from Chicago to Rome. It's been," he ventured a glance at her before his eyes dropped back onto the line in front of him. Only then did he finish his sentence, "Going to school where you don't know anyone and you don't speak the language can make for a lot of... well, a lot of nights alone."

The words made El freeze for a split second. She looked up, wide eyed. And after a moment, Mike looked back, "I get it," El said, her voice evening out to something more natural, more real, than before, "Traveling alone has been the same."

It was odd, the sense that traced through her as she said it so plainly, but it was comforting to admit it, however vaguely. And Mike seemed to understand, and this time he hadn't looked away. It was slightly disarming to look at him in such a way, straight on for the first time. She tried not to focus on the fact that he had *beautiful* eyes... deep and brown... like a warm blanket to fall into on a cold winter's day...

"Where else were you?" Mike blurted suddenly, his voice loud, "Other than, you know... here? Um," He shook his head in a sudden movement and let out a tight laugh, "Rome. Sorry, I forgot where I was for a second."

"It's okay, I don't think I've been sure of where I've been for at least a month," El said with a laugh, and then, so easily that she could have been talking to an old friend, she found herself speaking. Over the course of the next twenty minutes El shared some of the highlights of her trip with this stranger named Mike. She told him about beautiful cities of Europe, and the sometimes harrowing disgust of the hostels. She mentioned the one too many loaves of bread that she'd eaten and wasteful emptiness of her bank account.

Mike seemed interested in what she had to say, too, which felt so

very nice. He asked questions more and more as she continued. He seemed curious about what it was like to live out of a backpack, and how she had planned the entire trip. Together they shuffled forward through the line as they talked, and much faster than either of them had anticipated, they had made it to front of the line.

"Passaporto e biglietto?"

El jumped in surprise as the voice of the attendant sounded off behind her ear. "Oh!" El gasped, whipping around. She pulled her passport out of her backpack and handed it to the woman.

"Biglietto?" the woman repeated, her eyes dull and annoyed.

"I - "

"She wants your ticket," Mike offered helpfully behind her.

"Oh!" El exclaimed, digging it out of her bag, her face turning red as she did so, "Sorry. Here you go."

"Parli italiano?" the woman asked. El shook her head. The woman then turned to Mike.

"State viaggiando insieme?" she asked him.

"Um..." he replied, his eyes going wide. "Uh... si?"

The gate attendant held her hand out for his papers, which he handed over. The woman nodded and began to rattle off a whole host of words that El never in a million years would have understood, but it seemed that Mike was taking care of the situation for her as well as for himself. The attendant continued to ask questions as she looked over both El and Mike's passports, typing imperceptible things into her computer with every answer that she got from Mike.

This American man with broken yet ever so slightly manageable Italian was arranging her rescheduling for her, and oddly, she found herself trusting him to do it. She clearly needed more sleep and she definitely needed to eat, because that decision on her part was absolutely insane. His Italian seemed middling at best, judging by the creases in his eyebrows whenever the woman sped through a new set

of words, and the two word replies that he kept giving her seemed too minimal for the topic at hand. Yet, it seemed to have worked, because before she knew it the machine behind the counter was making loud printing noises and El had her passport back in her hand.

"Um... so, what just happened?" she asked in a whisper as they stepped away from the gate.

"Um..." Mike eyes were glued intently to his new paperwork. "So, there's a malfunction with the plane, I think? But there's a storm rolling in and they won't get it fixed in time. So it's cancelled for the night."

"Shit..." El breathed. Her stomach growled in protest and with it little bit of fear slipped in, "I - "

"No, it's okay!" Mike cut in with a reassuring manner. He leaned in close to her and pointed to the bottom half of her paperwork with lean fingers. "Yeah, see? Since it was a plane malfunction they have to legally put everyone up in a hotel. And then the flight is scheduled for 11am tomorrow morning."

A little bit of El's panic wore off at Mike's explanation, but only a little. El bit her lip as she tried to decipher the paperwork in her hands, "So, are we just supposed to... walk to this hotel?"

"I mean, I... I didn't catch that part, shit," Mike turned back around to the desk but the woman was already helping someone else. She refused to give him another glance. He worried his lip and raked his fingers through his hair, "Would you um... Would you be open to sharing a cab, maybe? We're at the same hotel."

"I mean, technically?" El sighed, "But I can't."

That got a look of surprise from Mike, "What do you mean you can't?"

"I can't afford it." she conceded, "I'm uh... my money ran out yesterday so I'm kind of screwed until I get back to Chicago."

"Oh, shit. Well, hey. It's no worry. I'll get the cab. No big deal."

El looked up in an instant, unable to hide her shock, "I uh... I really don't want to freeload."

"Please, it's fine," he waved off her worry with a sweep of his hand, "I'd have to get a cab anyway. You'll uh... you can just be my stowaway."

The laugh that emitted from El's lips was unexpected and high pitched, and it took both of them by surprise. The tiniest nervous flush bit at her cheeks, but this time it felt almost... welcome. "Okay, I'll be your stowaway. Thank you. Really, you're saving me today."

She wouldn't have admitted it then, but the smile that Mike gave her when she thanked him made it all worth it...

"Okay," he said with a hurried stutter, looking away in an instant, his eyes scanning the signs, "I think this is the way to the taxi line."

And just like that, after two whole months, in the literal last moments of her trip, El Hopper had finally found herself embarking on an adventure with someone other than herself.

And this stranger? He was... so. painfully. cute.

El bit back another smile as she followed Mike out of the airport.

—

What the *hell* had Mike gotten himself into?!

He looked at the papers in his hands once again as the cab pulled up to a nondescript building on the very edge of the city in a business park with literally nothing else around. He hoped against all hope that he had gotten even a shred of this correct, but his anxiety was getting the better of him.

Everything about the last three months had gone wrong, of course this had to go wrong, too. Right?

Honestly though, he really didn't want to think about that.

He didn't want to think about almost flunking out of the certificate

program. He didn't want to think about the fact that the basic white walls of the classrooms and his dorm room were the main extent of what he had seen of Rome. He didn't want to think about the existential crisis that was brewing within him about his future, this whole trip seeming to do nothing for him other than tell him what he *didn't* want to do.

If he was honest with himself, he'd only wanted to think about one thing for the last two hours...

and that was the girl who was now sitting next to him in the cab.

He'd noticed her about an hour before he'd learned that her name was El. He'd not been able to take his eyes off of her from the second that he spotted her, even though he'd tried because, well, he didn't want to be a creep. But still, he had become transfixed by her as she read a well worn paperback, her legs curled up below her in her seat, her hair laid out in soft messy braids on either side of her head, tied off with elastics that didn't match, her delicate fingers turning the pages and twisting the strings of her cozy looking light blue hoodie.

She looked serene, easy going, free. There was something about her that seemed to... wake him up.

And given that Mike had felt like he'd been asleep for at least the last month? That sensation was jarring.

Yet he'd never expected to find himself *here*, alone next to her in the back of a cab, serving as her Italian guide. When he'd seen her pacing down the line, though, a panicked expression on her face, something within him had just jumped, blurting out to her before he could even think.

God, he hoped he was actually helping and not making her travel infinitely worse.

He looked down again, for what felt like the twentieth time, to the papers in his hands. Sure enough, he was able to confirm yet again the address of the hotel and the time of the newly scheduled flight the next day. Hers had looked almost identical, so he tried to take that as a solace that he had done well. Or at least, well enough. For,

other than the fact that he'd been able to secure a hotel and new flights, he truly had not known a single other word that the flight attendant had said.

God, he hoped he hadn't missed anything.

Because it wasn't just him who he was responsible for, it was now also *her*. This *gorgeous* girl who was trusting him with her arrangements for the entire rest of her trip home.

At least he could get a breather soon. Within twenty minutes he could shut the door on his hotel room and let out the longest nervous sigh. Until then, though, he had to put on a knowing face.

The cab pulled up to the curb just as rain began to patter the windshield from the late afternoon sky. Mike jumped out, and El followed from the other side. The cabby quickly pulled out their bags without a word and tossed them on the ground before peeling away at the speed of light.

"Friendly service..." El grimaced under her breath as she lugged her huge backpack up off of the ground.

Mike snickered as he pulled out the handle of his roller bag and lifted his duffel to his shoulder, "Guess he didn't like Americans?"

"I mean, can you blame him? Americans are awful," El said with wry amusement as she hiked her backpack up on her back and began to walk toward the hotel.

"Two dumb American college kids?" Mike said, deadpan, "The worst."

El laughed in reply and Mike almost stopped in his tracks. It had happened three times now. Three times that he had heard her laugh. Each one had sent a shot of endorphins up his spine that made him dizzy like a madman.

Maybe it was just a lack of practice lately. He honestly couldn't remember having a conversation with even a remotely pretty girl once during his entire three month program.

'Out of practice' was generous, though. Mike knew himself knew

better than that... A girl like El was always going to knock him sideways.

He tried not to stare at her she led the way through the double doors.

The line in the nondescript hotel lobby was not too terribly long, but it was significant, and dotted with familiar faces from the line at the airport. It began to move fast, though, and before they knew it, Mike and El were next in line.

"Hey, really um... thank you for your help today," El said, breaking a short silence that had stretched longer than Mike had wanted. "I don't know what I would've done without you."

"Yeah, of course. I mean, anytime."

"I'll be sure to call you the next time I need an Italian guide," she said with a sly smile.

Oh how Mike *wished* that could be true. Something in him begged him to pick up the breadcrumb and offer his number, but it just felt so weird given the circumstances. The bravery died on his tongue.

He was saved when the hotel attendant waved him forward.

"Hi," he said, handing her his papers.

To his relief, this woman spoke English. She looked over the paperwork he had been given at the airport and nodded, pulling out two key cards and slipping them into a thin paper sheath. "For Wheeler and Hopper," she said casually as she handed them over, "Room 353. Elevator is on the left."

"Thanks," Mike said, taking the key before freezing in confusion. "Wait. Did you say Wheeler and -"

"-Hopper?" El's voice perked up behind him, finishing his sentence. She addressed the hotel attendant directly. "Does he have... my key too, then?"

The attendant looked between Mike and El with confusion for a moment. "Yes, I should hope so, as it's for the same room?"

"What?!"

"Oh...hmm..." the attendant said, looking back at the paperwork, "Yes, it's stated right here from the airline," she held up a printed rubric of room numbers and names and pointed to the middle of the page, "Michael Wheeler and Jane Eleanor Hopper?"

"Yes..." their voices echoed in union.

"Yes," the attendant repeated, her voice returning to cheerful helpfulness, "Yes. You're booked into the same room."

Hello! I always say I won't do this and start another fic, and then I always do it. But when a girl sees a headline that reads "Airline Books Strangers in Same Room With Single Bed" I just CANT HELP MYSELF! This one will go fast and will come out to only 3-4 chapters. My other fics are all also hard at work and new chapters of one of those should be coming in the next week. Let me know your thoughts on this one!

2. Chapter 2

El learned one thing very quickly: Mike was a gentleman.

He visibly gulped at the hotel attendant's words and replied without pause, "Oh, that's a mistake. We're not together. She needs her own room."

"Hmm..." the hotel attendant replied. Her brow furrowed as she looked over the spreadsheet in front of her. She held up a finger and pulled her papers together, muttering a quick, "Let me see what I can do," before she turned and disappeared through the door behind her.

"I - I'm so sorry," Mike said the instant that the door swung shut, spinning on his heel in El's direction, "I - I don't know how this happened."

El looked up at him curiously, "Why are you apologizing?"

"I uh... I - " words escaped him for a quick second. His fingers ran a jagged pattern through his hair. He looked at her directly, dark eyes filled with pleading, "I just need you to know that I didn't do this on purpose."

"- Oh - "

"- I'm not a creep. I promise you! I didn't mean for this to happen. I'm really really sorry. I - "

"- Mike - "

"- She was talking so fast back at the airport. I - "

"Mike. I don't think you did this on purpose," El said with a clear tone in an attempt to get a word in edgewise. He finally stopped talking then, but she could still see his cheeks flaming scarlet.

She could see why he would be worried, of course. The situation *did* look sketchy as hell from her vantage point: Standing in a foreign hotel with a near stranger learning that somehow his conversation on her behalf had resulted in a single hotel room for the both of them?

Yikes. Yet it was absolutely clear from the panic that he couldn't seem to quell: Mike had no ability to pull such a trick.

She found herself giving him a reassuring smile, "They're figuring it out. I'm sure it will be fine."

He didn't seem to know how to reply, but slowly the red receded from his cheeks and the stark line in his forehead relaxed, even if just a little bit. After a moment he returned the tiniest grateful smile, nodded, and turned back to the desk, his eyes gluing to the door where the hotel attendant had disappeared.

Throughout the intervening moments the hubbub of fellow passengers faded away. One by one they each received their keys from the other attendant on duty and disappeared down a nondescript hallway, until it was only Mike and El left alone in the lobby.

Sleet was now pounding loudly against the windowpanes behind them. It was the only thing that kept them company as they stood silently side by side while the minutes continued to creep by. Throughout the time El found her old familiar awkwardness attempting to slip back up her spine. A hesitation on what to say next. An awareness of her faded sweatpants. Even a worry that maybe she was breathing too loud. Yet, every time she looked over in Mike's direction the uncomfortable edge seemed to dissipate back into nothing. Despite the stress of the situation, she couldn't help but notice the odd calm that drifted over her while at his side. It was a jarring sensation to have after going months without it, yet she couldn't shake the odd sense of... familiarity maybe?

She wasn't sure what to call it, but it definitely felt nice.

Very nice.

He didn't seem to feel the same, however. To the contrary, he still looked riddled with anxiety.

She watched him from the corner of her eye as he stared with unyielding attention at the door behind the counter, as though he was attempting to will the attendant's return with his mind. El tried

not to stare at him, tried to pull her eyes away, but they simply kept drifting back.

She grew braver as the minutes passed. There was an elegance to his features, even in his tense state. Little things jumped out, calling her attention here and there, like how his almost black hair fell across his forehead. It was just a little messy, sweeping down and on the shaggy side, as though he hadn't had a cut since he'd left The States. She noted the specific way that he seemed to chew on his lip just a bit too hard, to the point where it left tiny indentations on the right side, that particular spot just a little redder than the rest. She couldn't help but notice his lashes, longer than hers, fanning as he blinked with an instant flourish.

She probably shouldn't have been thinking it at this point. It was really not the right topic, especially considering the circumstances, but she had to amend her previous statement:

Mike wasn't just cute. He was beautiful.

It was almost as though Mike had sensed her thoughts, for at that very moment he finally looked back in her direction. Biting the inside of her cheek to quell any guiltiness that could have given her away, she smiled at him tentatively.

He tried to smile back, but it came in more of a grimace.

At that moment the door swung back open. The attendant gave them both a tight smile. "I spoke with the airline. They agree that this was a mistake."

"See, I told you it'd be fine," El said with a reassuring lilt in Mike's direction.

"Unfortunately, though," the attendant continued, "We have no more rooms."

Now that was an unexpected statement.

"Excuse me?"

"The airline has booked the remainder of our hotel and there are no

rooms left," The woman said with a maddeningly casual shrug.

Mike visibly gulped and stepped forward, placing his hands on the desk, "There's nothing you can do?"

The agent looked at Mike with something akin to pity, "You're free to call around to any other hotels in the area or speak with the airline," her eyes skirted past the sleet stricken windowpanes as she continued, "On account of the storm, however, most of the planes have been grounded. I expect that any rooms near the airport are booked out."

Mike cursed under his breath and spun to El in an instant, his expression resolute, "I can get a hotel in the city or I can go back and sleep at the airport - I - "

"The management has offered dinner at our restaurant to help manage your inconvenience, in case you're unable to find other arrangements."

El's attention snapped to the desk, "Did you say free dinner?" she asked, her eyes widening like saucers.

For the first time the attendant showed a crack in her veneer, "Yes. We understand that this situation is less than... adequate. So please, if you're unable to make other arrangements, have dinner on us. We have a full service restaurant on the other end of the building. Simply add it to your room number at the restaurant and we will write it off as a courtesy for your trouble."

El did some frantic calculation:

Hours since she'd had a full meal: 24. Hours until she'd get a full meal for free on the plane: 16. Amount of money in her pocket: ...unsure but only pocket change left...

El's stomach seemed to answer for her, its growl loud enough that she was sure both Mike and the attendant could hear it.

"We can make this work," El said immediately, her hand shooting forward to snatch the room keys from the counter.

"What?!"

She turned to find Mike staring at her, mouth agape.

Her stomach growled again.

"Really, its okay." El waved of her hand in the common sign of 'no big deal'. "I've been sleeping in coed dorms most of my trip, anyway. Cheapest way to travel. Plus," she lowered her voice and bent closer to him, her jaw locked as she whispered the words, "Free dinner."

Mike stood frozen, seemingly unable to process what she had just said.

"Is it possible - if a room opens up can you contact us?" El asked the attendant.

"I can do that," the attendant said kindly. She lifted a piece of paper and began making a note.

El turned back to Mike to find that her attempt to placate the situation had not made him feel better. Tentatively, she offered him one of the keys. He took it numbly, his eyes stitched wide upon her, his expression smacking of disbelief. El hoisted her backpack higher upon her back and took a step toward the hallway, no longer wasting any more time. Her stomach seemed to do the leading. She found her way to a staircase and began the climb, unsure of where to find the elevator. Mike was absolutely silent in her wake.

It was only at the landing of the third floor that she realized what she had done.

With a guilty gasp, she turned to face him. "Hey, I'm sorry."

"What?"

"I got so focused on food that I got a bit blinded. Is this okay with you?"

He stepped up the final step and stopped in front of her, his expression indiscernible. He was quiet for a moment, seeming to weigh his words.

A hint of guilt laced through her at the pregnant silence. How could she have just made this decision for him and then walked away? He clearly wouldn't have done that to her.

"I just - is this *really* okay with you?" Mike finally asked, "I don't want you to be in a situation you don't feel comfortable with."

El considered his question, mulling it over one last time.

It was the oddest thing, the strength of her intuition's answer. She nodded, "Yes, I'm okay with this. Are *you* okay with this?"

Mike took a deep breath and ultimately nodded back, "If you're comfortable then... then yes, I'm comfortable."

"I mean," El shrugged as a tiny smirk crept to her lips, "This is what travel is supposed to be right? A crazy adventure? I can't really think of anything crazier than the fact that an airline booked two strangers in the same room."

A soft laugh flowed from Mike as he shook his head and rolled his eyes, "Yeah. This is a very crazy story."

"And look," El continued, catching his eye to make sure he understood, "I know I don't know you... well... *at all*, so I can't why I feel this way but... I trust you."

The change in his expression was like watching a storm front leave the sky. Tight tension flowed away from his gaze in an instant and something else took its place. Something new. Something soft and radiant and -

El had to look away.

"Yes. You can trust me. I promise," Mike said, his voice so very earnest.

El nodded, rooted to her spot. She ventured to look him in the eye again, something within her awakening in his gaze. She smiled, "I know."

"Cool," he said, holding her gaze almost longer than she could handle

it, before looking away and pointing down the hall to their room. "Well, um -" he intimated, gesturing his body in that direction. Only upon the loss of his eye contact did El realize that she hadn't been breathing. She pulled in a deep silent breath as he led the way. Stopping at Room 353 he pulled out the key and held the door open for her to pass through first. El took a step in, and stopped dead in her tracks.

"Um..."

"Oh my God..."

"I take it you also expected that there would be two beds?"

Her attention snapped up to Mike and then back to the room as all of Mike's tension seemed to cut through him in a barking laugh.

The room was *so small*. A single queen sized bed sat in the center... if you could call it the center. The room truly looked as though it had been constructed *around* the bed, only allowing enough space on each side to shuffle past. A single sad armchair was shoved in the far corner on the far side of the bed in lieu of a table.

The view of it all made something in El simply crack open. Laughter broke through her, punching at her ribs and tickling her brain. Before she knew it she had dropped her bag on the ground and had buckled halfway over, hiccuping for air, her hand cradling her forehead. "This is ridiculous!"

"Do you want to go back and talk to them?" Mike asked, his voice laced with amused surrender.

"I'll just sleep on the floor," El offered, pointing to the thin strip of floor on the far side of the bed, "There's enough space for me here."

"What? No!"

"No?"

He shook his head resolutely, "I can't do that. You're taking the bed."

El scoffed, "Where will you sleep?"

"The floor? The... the chair?"

She shot him an incredulous look, "You're a foot taller than me and you paid for my cab fair. You take the bed."

"What? No!" He shot back, his hair bouncing as he shook his head with even more fervor, "You've been traveling longer and you haven't eaten and you probably need more rest than me. I've been in a nice bed for months. You take the bed."

El smiled helplessly and held up her hand in a truce, "I'm really going to need to eat something to keep up this fight about who can be more chivalrous."

Mike let out a defeated chuckle, "Okay. Just... Oh my god, this is crazy!" His hands raked through his hair as his body pulled into a stretch, his eyes wide with disbelief. His long torso arched, riding up his soft dark blue sweater to reveal the slightest sliver of his abdomen above his cinched belt and very nice jeans.

Suddenly self conscious, El looked down upon her own ratty sweatpants, decimated hiking boots, and her mismatched sweatshirt, "I'm going to get changed and then go down and find food," she said instantly, grabbing her bag from the ground and heaving it through the bathroom door by the entryway, "I'll be just a minute."

"Yeah, sure," Mike said. He dropped to the bed as she ducked through the bathroom door, shutting it firmly.

Her body fell against the closed door and she looked up to find herself facing her own reflection. Now safe and alone, she let every emotion from the last hour flood her expression.

"WHAT. THE. HELL?!" She mouthed in a silent scream, her eyes wide and twinkling, her cheeks tugging upward into a crazed open-mouthed smile. This was INSANE. Had the fates aligned to throw ALL of the ridiculousness of her trip into one single night?! It sure seemed like it, for after almost two quiet serene months on the road, seeking adventure and finding nothing more than quiet countryside and silence, El had officially been thrust into one of the most ridiculous situations of her entire life.

And here, in this otherwise forgettable hotel, she found herself awash in such bizarre chaos that she was sure that she must have been dreaming. In fact, she realized, she should probably check that. For the guy in the other room? The tall, dark-eyed, respectable, sweet guy in the other room? He was definitely something that her overactive imagination would have created in a dream.

Her hand came up and lightly slapped against her own cheek.

She winced.

Nope, she was *definitely* awake. She was definitely here, living this, stuck on this insane ride for the next many many hours alone with... Mike.

El forced a deep breath, and upon her exhale she practically dove for her bag. Fighting with the enclosures, she wrenched it open and shoved her hand blindly down into its unseen depths, searching for the right tactile material to brush against her fingers. A single dress, left unused throughout her entire trip. It was nothing too special, just a simple knee length burgundy wrap dress with long sleeves. She'd packed just in case a nice occasion arose: a fancy dinner or a cocktail bar, a night at the theatre... A date, maybe?

She pulled her lip between her teeth as her attention darted to the paper thin wall that separated her from... from him.

Maybe she was overplaying how absolutely attractive she found him. Maybe she was just insanely lonely. Maybe the fact that she'd succeeded at having a simple conversation for more than three minutes of the first time in weeks felt so good that she'd had an aneurysm. Or maybe he was just really nice and thoughtful and friendly and tall and handsome and...

"El!" she mouthed to herself in the mirror, "*Pull it together!*"

This was just a voucher dinner in some nondescript hotel in the middle of nowhere suburbs of Rome. Dinner with a stranger who was *forcibly stuck* with her for the night. Nothing more.

Her heart whined.

"El, no. *This is **not** a date,*" she whispered sternly to herself. And she would do best to remember that.

This was not the night for the dress.

But, then again... what could it hurt? It was just a simple dress, after all! Modest yet classy... It could mean nothing! He didn't know her at all. Maybe it was just the way she dressed! Normal people dressed in dresses for a casual dinner.

She was clearly overthinking this.

Her hand stopped in her bag as the slick synthetic material finally wrapped through her fingers...

Before she knew it she had kicked off her sweats and boots and had tugged on the dress. She adjusted the tightness of the wrap in the mirror, checking it out from all possible angles. Moving closer, she adjusted the neckline, ensuring that the v-neck covered anything that wouldn't be considered modest. Neckline set, her eyes carded up her own reflection and frowned. A few minutes later her braids were gone. In their place, soft curls dropped against her shoulders, a bonus from the fact that she had allowed her hair to dry within the loose braids. She then quickly fished out her toiletry bag and her flat slippers, topping herself off with a quick brush of mascara and the slightest hint of lipgloss as she toed her way into less utilitarian shoes.

Taking a step back, she raked her reflection with hesitation.

The tiniest squeaking noise escaped her lips.

Her heartbeat was racing, and it was only then that she fully allowed herself to feel it. It had been coming on since she'd first laid eyes on him but now, here in the relative privacy of the bathroom, only accompanied by her own reflection, she finally gave into it. It was a bubbling sensation, starting deep within her, and it percolated like steam directly behind her sternum. It made her feel delightfully shaky, and it forced her lips into a giddy and perennial smile.

She took a final look at herself in the mirror. Then, with a little

goodbye to her own self she turned, placed her hand on the doorknob, forced a final deep breath, and took a step out into the hotel room.

OoOoOoO

A thick fog of panicked awkwardness had grown around him so heavy that he could have almost choked upon it. He stared at the bathroom door, its soft green hue unyielding as the minutes passed by and the girl that he only knew as El remained on the other side. Sleet sounded off on the windows behind him. The sharp staccatos felt like shellack encasing him within this tiny room... with no one but her.

It was too kind of her, the easy grace with which she was handling his massive mistake. He could see his mistake plain as day now: The mistranslations at the airport had been so very slight, but they had been absolutely damning. Yet, even after what he'd done, *she* had been the one to ask *him* if *he* was okay with all of this?

How could he not be okay with this? How could this girl ever think that this would be anything other than a bizarre dream come true? Moreover, that she'd *forced* him into this?

Quite the contrary, and he tried to avoid the thought, but something inside of him wanted this *too much*. Wanted to know her. Wanted to laugh at her jokes and relish in her travels and her smiles and anything and everything about her that she was willing to share... He shook his head frantically in an effort to dislodge the less than gentlemanly path that his thoughts were about to take.

He caught his reflection in the TV, then. He looked haggard. Messy hair and slumped shoulders. Creases at his eyes from the shock of the situation. Taking a step toward it to get a better look, he dragged his fingers through his hair in a furious manner, attempting against common sense to tame his unruly mop.

He jumped at the sound of her footsteps and turned in her direction as she re-entered the room.

"Oh -"

His voice halted before he finished his sentence.

El stood in the doorway, utterly transformed.

The simmering heat and nerves within Mike spiked to a fever pitch as he took her in. She was draped in a soft maroon dress. It followed the center of her body like a silhouette, bellling out softly at the hip to drape down perfectly, stopping right above her knees. She'd discarded her messy braids, leaving her soft brown hair to lay in decadent waves against her shoulders. Her eyes seemed to sparkle a little more than before.

She looked absolutely gorgeous.

Her feet shuffled against scratchy carpet as she spoke, "Um... I was going to cash in on that free dinner. Would... um... do you want to join me? Are you hungry?"

"Y-yeah!" Mike almost yelped, stepping forward with such eagerness that he came close to tripping over himself.

If she'd noticed, she was kind enough to hide it. "Might as well make the most of it and eat everything on their menu, right?" She said with a joking shrug, "they didn't specify a limit."

"I mean, I think they owe up that much," Mike replied, "Should I change, though? Because you uh - you look..." he tried to stop himself from raking his eyes up her body, but he wasn't sure if he succeeded, "You look really nice."

El ducked her chin in reply, and a closed mouthed smile showcasing a dimple in her cheek materialized upon her, "Thank you. But no, you don't need to change. You already look nice. It was me. I was literally wearing pajamas before."

Mike felt his back straighten and his shoulders square at her words, "Okay, cool. Thanks. Um... Do you uh - do you want to go now?"

"Please," she said adamantly, "I'm so hungry I could eat my backpack."

"Well, we don't want that," Mike replied with a laugh as he gestured

to the door.

The hotel was a bit of a labyrinth. They finally found their way back to the elevator that had they missed before, yet they definitely weren't alone in arriving to it. A large group had accumulated in their wake, a small stream of hungry travelers likely headed to the same location as them. So, when the ding of the elevator doors opened, Mike followed El in with about eight other people. The space filled up fast around them. Too fast, in fact, for before he knew it two older ladies had trapped him against the wall, El sandwiched directly in front of him.

"Sorry," El said with a guilty expression as she shuffled closer to accommodate the incoming throng. He tried to pull himself back further against the wall, but it was no use. Before he knew it she was directly up against him, her hip brushing up against the back of his hand, her surprisingly soft scent drifting around him.

"Um..." he breathed, leaning down, hardly needing to do more than whisper for how close she was to him, "I really think this elevator has reached its weight limit."

"Well," she replied, considering the others pressed in around them, "I guess if we have to die in an elevator, at least it'll be another story to tell."

Mike laughed, "I - I don't think we'd be able to tell the story of how we died in an elevator. We'd be... dead."

She looked up with lively surprise, "You don't believe in an afterlife?"

"Um..."

"I mean, I bet that's the best time to tell stories. You truly have nothing else to do, for all of eternity."

Mike nodded thoughtfully, "Good point. Death by elevator via bad translator would be a good story to tell forever. Well, maybe for you."

Her eyes darted up to his for the quickest moment as she smirked at his words, biting back a laugh. She was so close that he could almost feel the energy of her expression radiating from the golden flecks in

her eyes. Something in him stirred at that split second before she abruptly looked away. A fullness in his chest. An aching awareness of the lack of space between them...

He didn't get long to ponder, though. Instead, the elevator doors dinged and slid open just like any normal ride.

"Well, I guess we weren't destined to die here," she said this a teasing lilt as she stepped out and followed the throng of people toward a simple sign that just said 'RESTAURANT'.

The second they stepped into the doors of the restaurant they stopped in their tracks. To be fair, Mike wasn't sure exactly what he had expected from a mid-grade hotel's on-premise restaurant, but it definitely wasn't this.

They found themselves in a small ballroom. Outdated but surprisingly classy. The lighting was soft and diffused, with candles dotting each table, White table clothes and full glassware adorned each table, and, despite the room filling up with diners, the voices remained hushed by the plush walls and thick curtains, making for an oddly intimate sensation within the almost grand space."

"What *is* this place?" El asked, wide eyed.

"I have no idea," Mike replied quietly, "but I can't help but feel... we're not in *The Shining*, are we?"

El stifled a laugh, brushing her shoulder into his arm with a slight push as not just one, but two waiters approached them. They each wore white sleeves and a black vest.

"Numero di Camera?" the taller of the two asked.

El looked up to Mike helplessly.

"Oh right!" Mike stuttered, "Trecentocinquantatré."

The shorter of the two waiters nodded and pointed toward the far end of the room to a table against the wall. He led them through the room, pulled a chair for El, and handed them their menus, disappearing without another word.

"This place is so oddly fancy," Mike said as he picked up his menu.

"Yes!" she agreed, looking around with wide eyes, "I'm so glad I changed."

"I'm kind of wishing I'd changed now."

"You're fine," she said with a dismissive wave, "You look great."

Once again her eyes darted up to meet his, only to run away the instant that she spoke. She seemed supremely interested in the menu at that, which was nice because at least it gave Mike the space to let his true expression of baffled flattery rise to his face.

...She'd complimented him twice in ten minutes. That fact was not going unnoticed.

"Thank you," he found himself whispering under his breath as his eyes glued his own eyes back to the menu. The truth was, though, he could hardly read it. Not due to a lack of acumen this time, but rather from the pulse of his nerves. They danced around his brain, begging him to look back up at her, refusing to translate, stamped in shock that any of this was happening at all.

The waiter's return caught Mike by surprise. He almost jumped as he heard the man's voice at his right. Completely unprepared, Mike pointed to two quick things on second page of the menu with a shaky finger, nodding yes at any of the questions that the waiter seemed to ask. Handing his menu back, he looked up to El as she simply said 'spaghetti' and practically tossed her menu to the man, her eyes no longer on him, or the menu, or the waiter.

She only had eyes for the bread that the waiter had placed on the table.

Only then did Mike remember that she'd mentioned how broke she was all the way back at the airport. He couldn't help but wonder the last time that she'd had a real meal, and he chided himself for not realizing earlier that he should've tried to do something about that. Offering to get her a sandwich from the airport or something. Anything. For the way that she tore into the bread was ravenous,

sopping it quickly in the olive oil that the waiter had set down and closing her eyes with an intense sense of delight as she chewed.

It took her a minute before she seemed to remember that she wasn't alone.

"I'm sorry," she said through a slightly full mouth, "I'm starving."

"No, it's okay," Mike said with a laugh, reaching for a piece himself.

"It's really good bread," she said as she reached for another piece, bumping into his hand as she snatched the piece right next to the one that he chose. "I'm going to miss bread in Europe so much. I wish bread was this good in America."

"Honestly, the food has been the absolute best part about living in Italy," Mike said in agreement, "No matter how bad class got each day, I at least knew I'd enjoy dinner. "

El looked up at him again, a little more light in her eyes now that'd gotten something in her stomach, "What'd you order?"

The waiter sidled up beside the table with what Mike expected to be water, but he hardly noticed, his attention on El.

"Oh, I don't even know what I ordered, honestly. I've never had it before. Whatever it is it'll be good so - "

It was then that he realized that the liquid being poured in front of him was not clear. Instead, it was a deep deep red.

"Did you order wine?" Mike asked, his brow knitting toward El in confusion.

"Nope," she said, looking up in surprise as the waiter moved to pour her a glass.

Mike held up his hand for the waiter to stop, "Um sorry? I didn't order this."

"Scusa, parlo solo Italiano." The waiter replied, pulling away after both of their glasses were filled.

"Oh, right," Mike shook his head and tried to pull his Italian back up to the front of his mind, "Non ho ordinato vino?"

The waiter regarded him curiously before he shook his head as though Mike was wrong. He placed the bottle down and stepped away, returning with a menu. He opened to a page and circled the menu items that Mike had ordered.

There it was, plain as day, that it was in fact he who had ordered them wine.

Mike dropped his head. "Shit.."

"Non lo vuoi?" the waiter asked.

He looked up to El with helpless surrender, "El, do you want to help me drink this bottle of wine that I absolutely did not mean to order?"

El giggled in reply and nodded, something almost pitying in her expression. "Maybe it's for the best," El said as the waiter walked away, "Honestly, you look like you could probably use a glass of wine."

Mike smirked sardonically and looked back down at his glass, "Yeah, you're probably right."

"Hey," she offered kindly, lifting her glass in the air, "Cheers to one of the weirdest nights ever."

Mike had no other choice but to laugh, "To one of the weirdest nights ever," he agreed as he clinked his glass against hers and took a deep drink. The wine was full bodied and jammy. It offered an intensely comforting sensation as it slid down his throat. He let himself enjoy it, his eyes slipping shut for just a quickest moment.

El's voice brought him back to the table, "So, can I ask you a question?"

"Um... Sure."

She regarded him with more of what was becoming her patent look of curiosity. She spoke slowly, seeming to choose her words carefully.

"How does a person with... I hope you don't take this rudely. You're infinitely better than me at it, but... how does a person who is less than fluent in the language come to find themselves at school in Italy? I mean, it's one of the only countries in Europe where English isn't readily spoken?"

The dark chuckle that came from Mike was resigned. He took another deep gulp of his wine, tore into a new piece of bread, and popped it in his mouth before he answered. "I'll tell you but it's embarrassing."

"It can't be that bad!"

Mike grimaced and dropped his chin to his hand, elbow on the table. "I was overly confident."

"How so?"

"Well, for starters I had no idea that English wasn't as common here in Italy. Everyone always told me that everyone in Europe spoke English so I just... took them at their word I guess? But um.. I started taking Italian as an elective in Sophomore year of college because... damn this sounds nerdy, but I was reading a lot of Umberto Eco at the time and I was curious what it would be like to read him in his native language."

"That doesn't sound nerdy!" she said with a debating tone, "That sounds awesome."

"Well, thank you. Anyway, so I started studying Italian because I had elective hours in my schedule and well, I thought I'd gotten good at it. I can read Italian pretty well, or so I thought. But then, um, during my senior year my dad got in my head telling me all this stuff about how my English major wouldn't amount to anything, you know, job-wise? Anyway, he thought I should supplement with something else and I just... well, I thought I'd try to kill two birds with one stone and travel here to do it. So I came here to try my hand at this kind of transitional program that would prep me to apply for graduate school for applied science."

Her expression was sympathetic, "Not what you expected it to be, I take it?"

"I don't even know, if I'm honest. Turns out reading Italian well does not translate to speaking or hearing Italian well. At least not for me. I got so hung up on trying to piece out the language in each of my lectures that I almost flunked the program."

The admission fell from his lips with an ease that was alarming. He hadn't told anyone... not his parents or his friends or... or anyone... about the results. Honestly, he didn't even want to tell himself. Yet they fell out easily to El.

Maybe it was the fact that she was a stranger, someone who was likely drifting through his life like a ship passing in the night. But it felt like such an infinite relief to say it out loud to someone that he... he trusted.

"That... sucks," she said simply, her tone so deeply understanding, "I'm sorry."

"Yeah... I uh..." he let out a deep breath, "I don't know why I told you all that but - but yeah. That's how I ended up here and I guess that's also why I'm heading home. It's been a, um, a humbling few months, to say the least."

She didn't speak for a moment. She took a fresh piece of bread and moved it slowly through the olive oil as she considered her next words, "Well... even if it didn't turn out the way you thought it would, at least you tried something you wanted to try. Most people wouldn't have taken the risk. It's really cool that you did."

Her words felt like a salve on his heart. His voice was hushed when he replied, "Thank you."

Her smile was soft in reply, her eyes kind upon him in a way that made it oddly easier to breathe, "And look at it this way," she continued, gesturing around her, "Your Italian skills not only got us a free place to stay but also free dinner and free wine. So, I'd say you're doing pretty good."

Mike rolled his eyes with a laugh, "Well, I'd have to admit that it was actually my lack of Italian skills that did that but... I'll take the compliment."

She shrugged playfully and reached for yet another piece of bread. "So, Applied science isn't for you, then? Did you like it, you know, the parts that weren't stuck behind a language barrier?"

He thought on her question for a moment and ultimately shook his head. "No, I mean, I don't know. It was interesting but it wasn't like... I guess I didn't find any passion in it? So I don't know if I'd want to do it my whole life, like for a career."

"What are you passionate about, then?"

The word passion popped off her lips like a tiny explosion. Mike swallowed against another rise in his chest.

"Sorry," she said, seeming to read something in his expression, "Am I being nosy?"

"No, not at all," he waved his hand to dispel her worry, "I mean I have my degree in English because I love to write."

Her eyes absolutely lit up in reply. "Really? What do you write?"

"Oh, I mean, um... well... " he felt it, that familiar flush of nervous shame that came with talking about his writing, but he tried to fight it down. "I've have a few short stories that have been published and -"

" - You've been published already?" she interjected, her eyes widening, "That's so cool!"

Mike was pretty sure that he grew three inches taller at her words. His lips fought to keep his expression even, but he lost, a huge smile breaking through, "Yeah, I mean not in anything too big just a couple of small magazines and such here and there, but yeah."

"Still, though!" she said excitedly, "What do you write about?"

"Lots of stuff. But um... I guess I think about weird circumstances a lot, you know?"

"Like strangers getting booked into the same hotel room?" she teased, an amused giggle bouncing out of her.

"More like alternate universes. Mind bendy fantasy sci-fi. Stuff like that."

Her eyes narrowed with curiosity, "Okay, like what?"

"Like..." okay Mike this is your chance to impress, "Okay, so I haven't written this yet but I've been batting around this idea that's like," Mike gestured at the room, to the waiters, the dinner patrons, and everyone around them. "So, say everyone in this room just *poof* gets dropped back in time. Together."

The most adorable quizzical wrinkle appeared between her eyebrows, "What?"

"It's like, okay," he took a quick breath and tried to reform his thought, he snapped his fingers, "like that, by some weird rip in the time-space continuum or something, all of a sudden every person inside these walls just finds themselves transported back to like, I don't know, 600 years in the past. But we're in the exact same geographical place."

El looked around the room and tried to make sense of his thought, "So, this whole group of people shows up out of nowhere in 1400s suburbs of Rome?" she laughed, backtracking, "I don't really think they had suburbs then, but you get what I mean."

"Exactly like that," he said with a nod, "So like, taking all of these people and sending us all back in time in a split second when no one is expecting it. That would be pretty insane, right?"

She nodded, "That would definitely be weird."

"We'd need to band together, right? Create a community to protect each other? To survive? And just like, what are the dynamics of that? How would everyone fare? Who would be the leader? Who would we sacrifice? How would we defend ourselves?"

El seemed to consider the topic as she dipped the final piece of bread into the olive oil. "In this room? I think I'd fare pretty well, at least."

"Ooh, confident," Mike found himself teasing, "Interesting."

El gave him a sly look, "You don't know my skills."

"Touché," he conceded.

"People would flock to you," she said, jutting her chin toward him.

"Me? Why?"

"Well, you're the tallest young man in here. That's a sign of strength. Virility."

The sardonic laugh cut from Mike's lips before he could stop it, "No one has ever once called me 'virile'. But okay, I appreciate that. I don't think I'd end up as the leader, though," he looked around, considered for a quick moment, and pointed to a single man at a table by the far wall, "That guy would be the leader."

El leaned forward and took a glance to where he pointed. "Why him?"

"Look at him. He's confident enough to drink a whole bottle of wine alone but he's still put together. He's older, but not too old. Strong, but seems to also have some wisdom."

El nodded in understanding, "He's seasoned."

"Exactly," Mike replied, accentuating with a strike of his finger, "He's probably well spoken. Intelligent. Like you said, seasoned. I'd follow him."

She nodded and pulled back to look at him. She pointed to him with the bread in between her fingers, "And considering I speak no Italian. I'd follow you - "

"-Oh!" Mike retorted, hands in the air, "No, I'm sure that after a while you'd find a much more effective translator than me. I would become completely useless to you."

"So down on yourself!" she joked through a mouthful of bread, "You have other qualities besides basic translation skills!"

"Oh, really?" he asked, getting braver, "And what are those?"

She looked at him for a moment, her gaze disarming. "You're excellent company." she finally said.

Mike bit his lip, hard, just to make sure that this moment was real.

"You - You think I'm excellent company?"

To his surprise, his question seemed to have the opposite of his intended effect. Because at that, El's expression dropped a bit. She reached for her wine and took a long pull. Eyes on the glass, she swirled it thoughtfully for a few seconds.

"Yeah," she finally said, looking back up to him with a thread of something...vulnerable... in her gaze. "I mean... I don't know, " she shrugged, "I, ugh, I don't know why I'm saying this. It's embarrassing. But... sometimes I'm not like.. not the most socially adept person."

"Really?" he asked with the utmost surprise, "You might want to rethink that, because you totally could have fooled me."

"Yeah, so yeah, that's the thing!" she said, her expression growing adamant again, "I uh... I just, you know, I freeze up around strangers sometimes, well, usually. So, that's kinda the thing here. You're one of those super rare people who are easy to talk to from the jump. You're very welcoming. So yes, excellent company."

There was a gratefulness in her gaze that made him have a million questions, each of them playing on his heart. He didn't ask them though. Instead, he just smiled. "Thanks. You're excellent company, too, by the way."

"Yeah?" she asked with a shy laugh, "Well, I'm at least glad that you're not regretting helping my hopeless ass in the line back there."

"Not in the slightest," he replied, his voice plainly honest. She looked back up to him and returned his smile, holding his gaze for a little longer than she had before, "So," he continued, scrambling for something, anything to say to continue the conversation, "If we both think that we're excellent company, would you want to form an alliance?"

"An alliance?" she asked, her brow knitting sudden confusion.

"You know, if we ended up getting thrown back in the past? Excellent company is one of the top requirements for a situation like being sent back in time against our will. We could band together. At least we know that we can get along decently well."

She considered him playfully for a moment before holding out her hand to shake, "Okay, deal. We'll be in this crazy alternate reality together."

He took her hand over the table. It felt soft in his grip as he shook it, delicate yet firm. Warm and electric. He pulled hand away almost by force, ripping his attention back to his last train of thought.

"So, if we're forming an alliance in this alternate reality," he continued, his voice hiding almost all of his now stuttering pulse, "We have to know each other's skills. What can you contribute?"

She thought for a moment, swirling her wine once again, "I can kickbox."

"You can Kickbox?!" Mike exclaimed, "Holy shit! I made a good alliance. I um... I can run and swim fast, I guess."

"Useful!" she replied in agreement, "I'm trained in de-escalation and negotiation techniques?"

"Really?" he said, taken aback, "How'd you get those skills?"

"Oh, my degree is in social work. I've been trained to de-escalate between families and bitter exes. Useful skills."

"Very useful," he agreed, "So yeah, I guess I can... poorly translate your de-escalation pleas into broken Italian."

That got a laugh from El. She put her wine back on the table as she buckled over a bit, her eyes rolling as she looked back up at him. Mike laughed in reply and took another drink of his wine, emptying his glass. "No, but really, I can... I can tell stories. We can be stuck in the middle ages for every and I'll never run out of stories to tell."

El nodded in approval, "Always need a person like that around the fire in the 1400s, I'm told."

"That's what the ancient people I've met tell me," Mike teased.

"And imagine how blown away those ancient people will be by your wild future stories," she exclaimed, before she too drained the last of her first glass of wine. She gestured to the bottle, and Mike nodded, filling up her glass and then his own, the bottle emptying upon a heavy pour in each glass.

"And... oh! I did a lot of stick sword fighting as a kid," Mike added jovially as he waited for the final drops to fall into his glass, "That should come in handy."

"Ooh yes!" El exclaimed, "You can fight our enemies into submission with a stick and then they won't see me coming while I place a well aimed kick."

"You have a very good tactical mind, I see," Mike teased, impressed, "Another useful trait."

El brushed it off as she took a fresh drink of wine, "You don't get raised by a cop and not know make the best move in a fight."

"You were raised by a cop?" Mike exclaimed, "Oh man, you're going to end up protecting me by the end of this. You realize this, right? Are you sure you don't want to rethink this alliance?"

At that, El smiled, not holding back. She looked radiant. A little tipsy. Eyes shining and cheeks blushed.

How?

How was this girl looking at him like this?

It wasn't like Mike hadn't had his share of dates, short relationships, and flings here and there. Of course he had throughout the years. But not with someone like El. With her glowing smile and disarming honey eyes. With her soft brown hair that his fingers were itching to touch if he allowed himself to admit it. Girls like her did not smile at Mike like this.

Or maybe he'd never given them the chance.

Maybe he'd never allowed himself to believe that they would give *him* a chance.

Yet, now a chance had been handed to him, seemingly by the fates themselves, and he found that he couldn't look away from her.

Thank God he was interrupted by the waiter bringing their food.

"So you uh... you studied social work, huh?" He asked as his plate was laid down in front of him, "That's really important work."

"Yeah," she said with a shrug, "I'll admit I'm a little nervous about it as a career. That's one of the reasons I took this trip. Have a big grand experience before life got kind of crazy with a stressful job"

"No, that's cool though," he encouraged, "You're actually going to do something that matters."

"Thanks, I hope so." She said, ducking her head as she twirling her fork into her spaghetti, "I just... you know, childhood is such an important time and helping kids get a good start is super important to me."

"What got you into that?"

At that, El looked up, hesitant for a moment, "Personal experience," she finally said as she reached for her glass of wine, taking a deep pull.

"Oh," Mike said quick, "Sorry, I -"

"- Don't be," she waved his hesitation of with a brush of her hand, "I just had a couple hard years in the foster care system after my mom died and before my adopted Dad got me out of it. I want to make it easier for other people who end up in the system."

Everything about El suddenly seemed a little different as she spoke so plainly about her life. The air felt a little heavier and a little less like a dream. A little more like all of this around them was actually real.

"I'm sorry," Mike said soberly, "That's... really cool of you though, wanting to help others. So, is it just you and your dad now?"

"It was," El replied, biting her lip as she seemed to form a new thought, "My dad just got remarried a couple months ago so I guess I have brothers now. That's weird."

"Bad weird?"

"No, I don't think so. I haven't spent enough time with them to feel any like, familial bond or anything, but they're nice. I was supposed to stay with my step-brother for the night in Chicago but it doesn't look like that is happening anymore. Looks like my dad should be able to pick me up now with this layover. Oh," she blanched, "I need to let them know my flight was cancelled."

"Oh you're right," Mike said with a guilty laugh. Mike knew that Will would put up with a lot, but making Will go to the airport when Mike wasn't even going to fly in for a whole other day... that might be pushing it, "I completely forgot. I need to call my roommate when we get back to the room."

"Anyway," El continued, "I'll see my new brothers at Christmas in a couple of weeks, though, so ask me again after that."

"So, you don't live in Chicago?"

El shook her head, "I grew up in Indianapolis but - "

"Oh really?" Mike said, his eyebrows perking in surprise, "I'm from Indiana, too!"

"Really?" El asked, suddenly wide eyed.

"Yeah," he replied, shrugging dismissively, "I'm from the boonies, though, nothing like Indianapolis. I went straight to college in Chicago and never looked back. Where'd you go to school?"

"IU in Bloomington. You?"

"Valparasio."

"Oh, that's cool," El said, taking a sip of her wine, "So, do you like Chicago? Are you staying there now that you're on your way back?"

"Gosh, I haven't thought about it yet, really," Mike replied, almost surprised that he hadn't asked himself that question in the intervening weeks, "I mean, I still have my apartment there. I rented out my room for the semester but I thought maybe I'd have a better idea of what I wanted to do when I got back."

"Not so much?"

"It's like..." Mike sighed, "Even more confusing than before?"

"I get that," El said, "You should do what you love, though. I mean, no better time to do it."

"How do you mean?"

She shrugged and played with her food as she continued, "I don't know. It's something my mom always told me before she passed away. She um.. she always told me that when you're young that's the best time to do the stuff that other people think is crazy, because you have less holding you back. The older you get the more things pop up, responsibilities and stuff, to slow you down, so she always recommended the 'This might be your last day, live for today' approach."

"You mom sounds like she was really cool."

"She was the best," El replied wistfully, "I try to live by that advice. Not to get too caught up in the money and what the world says we're 'supposed to do'. So, you should write book, you know? What do you have to lose?"

He tried to find an answer, but "Nothing," was the answer that he found.

Her eyes lit up at his answer, "Well, you have nothing to lose, then definitely do it."

He found a nervous laugh crawling its way from his chest. Heavy, overwhelmed, punch drunk. "Wait, you don't even know if I'm a good writer."

El's smile was demure and she avoided his eyes as she replied, "I'm

sure you're a good writer."

Mike drained his glass, his skin heating.. Something was happening within him. Her words, so full of surety despite knowing nothing about him at all, had hit him in the chest like a bullseye, shaking his core in a way that released a sensation of inspiration so intense that he had a hard time keeping himself in the chair. His back had straightened in his chair. His lungs had filled. He let something inside of himself believe her. He felt her words strike like flint, lighting embers in his chest that had laid dormant for months.

"You're going to be a great social worker."

She looked up, surprised, "Why do you say that?"

"Because if you're anywhere near as good at talking to kids about their futures as you are talking to me, they'll all be in great hands."

El beamed, the fire dancing in the depths of her eyes, "Thank you. I'm um... I'm glad." Her fingers danced across the tabletop in quick succession, reaching for the stem of her wine glass and taking a large drink of the jammy red he'd erroneously ordered yet was so very glad they'd received.

They finished up shortly after. The table had been cleared of anything edible, and the dining room had emptied of people during their conversation. Mike had completely missed how much time had gone by, but by the time they got up to leave not even the waiters were clearly visible.

They made their way out of the door before El stopped in her tracks, held up her finger to get him to wait for a second, and bounded gleefully back through the restaurant door. When she returned, he noticed that her sweater was wrapped around her arm, pulled to her chest. Only when he had re-entered the hotel room did she present what she'd been hiding.

She looked guiltily delightful as she showed him a stolen half-bottle of wine. "I noticed it on the table next to us. They'd abandoned it," she admitted.

"You're a thief!" Mike cried, dumbfounded and wonderfully tipsy, "I thought your dad was a cop!"

"I'm not a thief!" she retorted, slapping him playfully on the arm, "This was going to go to waste! I'm just... recycling it!" She shot him a sly smile before bringing the bottle straight to her lips and taking a swig, then handing him the bottle.

Mike stared at the bottle, the invitation glorious and exciting. She looked so comfortable and giddy as she handed him the bottle, her dress matching the wine stain that now painted her lips. Her eyes watched him expectantly, and when he met her gaze, this time he did not look away. Something within him, something absolutely insane, was dancing with anticipation. Futile he was sure, but just the mere sensation of spending dinner with her... it had been the most fun he'd had on his entire trip.

And it wasn't over yet. Not by a long shot.

Mike's nerves danced like fire as his fingers brushed against hers and he took the bottle from her grasp. He laid his lips to it, directly where her's had been just seconds prior, and took a drink.

Oh man this fic is fun to write. Would love to hear your thoughts! Drop a review or hit me up on IG at el - borealis or Tumblr at el_borealis!